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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

3 August 1983

CASTRO, THE US, AND NEGOTIATIONS

Summary

Cuban President Fidel Castro has recently sent a number of clear signals that he is interested in reaching a less confrontational relationship with the US. He appears ready to make policy changes--as he has done in difficult times in the past--to accommodate the US on issues he does not consider vital so long as he can do so without losing face. On fundamental issues, however, such as his relationship with Moscow and his "right" to aid revolutionaries throughout the world, he will not retreat. Moreover, Castro's unshakable hatred and fear of the US--conditioned by 30 years of hostility--indicate that US relations with Cuba are likely to be hostile as long as he remains in power. Nevertheless, within these general strictures, the US should be able to profit through talking with him. His interest in opening channels to Washington would falter quickly, of course, if the burgeoning pressures that drove him to be more forthcoming abated or if he found that increased liaison with the US would bring no relief at all. Similarly, any attempt to move the bilateral exchanges into the public eye would probably convince him that the US was more interested in a propaganda victory than in good faith bargaining; he wants no part of talks that portray him to the world as submitting to "imperialist" pressure.

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This memorandum was requested by Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Michael H. Armacost. It was prepared [redacted] Office of African and Latin American Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and should be addressed to Chief, Cuba-Caribbean Branch, Middle America-Caribbean Division, OALA [redacted]

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Castro's Dilemma

Castro's cautious probing on talks with the US in our opinion, stems directly from his conviction that he and his regime will be seriously threatened if current trends continue. On the defensive because of both internal and external pressures, he probably sees negotiations as the only reasonable option that can change the course of events at an acceptable cost.

On occasions in the past, he has sought talks only as a means of buying time--for the Salvadoran insurgents, for example, in late 1981 and early 1982--and he thus had no intention of offering concessions of any kind. Now, however, he seems to realize that some compromise on his part is necessary if he is to avert disaster. Other evidence suggests that Castro is not merely seeking to buy a few months of time. Havana's probing of US views on Angola, Central America, and emigration has been accompanied by a variety of other actions to relieve pressure on Cuba. For example, Cuba seems to be striking a more conciliatory posture with China, has moved to resolve longstanding irritants with several South American nations, and seems to be actively engaged in consolidating its friendships with a number of other African nations.

The pressures on him are indeed formidable. Serious problems have been coming to a head for Cuba in Africa. Mounting pressure from the UNITA guerrillas and dogged US diplomacy have helped to turn Cuba's relationships with Angola and Mozambique from assets into liabilities. South African agreements with these countries undercut the guerrilla struggles being waged by Cuba's allies in the SWAPO and ANC, respectively, and the Cuban troop presence in Angola became the major stumbling block to a peaceful solution to the problem of Namibian independence. Castro, stung by Luanda's and Maputo's failure to consult with him prior to their meetings with South Africa, had his confidence in the Dos Santos and Machel governments badly shaken.

In addition, as the UNITA insurgency has widened and become more threatening to the Cuban-backed regime in Luanda, the Cubans have become more dangerously involved in the fighting. They are taking more casualties, and may have even had to increase their commitment of troops over the past year to keep the insurgents from overrunning key government towns and garrisons.

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At the same time, the Grenada experience last October proved to Castro that Washington was prepared to ignore world criticism and resort to military force to stem Communist expansion in the region. He was subsequently dismayed when opinion polls in the US showed wide support for the intervention. He had long counted on US public opinion as a brake on Washington's foreign policy and had an exaggerated estimate of his ability to influence the US citizenry through propaganda and his manipulation of the US press. Post Grenada polls made him fear that Washington, assured of solid popular backing, would take action against Cuba; his anxiety grew as the US massed military and naval might in Central America and the Caribbean. Moscow, meanwhile, devoting attention to the problem of US missiles in Europe, seemingly paid scant heed to Cuba's worsening military plight. Castro clearly understands--and has admitted publicly--that in any military confrontation with the US, Cuba will have to rely on its own defenses.

At home, Castro has admitted that austerity will be the watchword at least through the end of the century. He has finally come to understand that Moscow's economic largesse has limits and that Cuba cannot continue to expect major increases in Soviet subsidies. His plans for accelerated industrialization were dashed by the recent CEMA summit in Moscow and Cuba had to suffer the indignity of being lumped with Mongolia and Vietnam as CEMA basket cases.

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In addition, Cuban popular attitudes clearly have Castro worried, as his extensive--and expensive--measures to counter Radio Marti attest. The Mariel refugee exodus in 1980 did little to reduce the number of would-be emigrants--a year later [redacted] five percent of the population (some 500,000 persons) would leave if given the chance--and, given Cuba's current economic outlook, the total has probably increased. [redacted] Cubans are weary of shortages, increasingly apathetic regarding labor productivity, and concerned over the cost in Cuban blood of Castro's internationalist policies. Cubans at home were badly rattled last October by the Cuban casualties in--and Castro's handling of--the Grenada intervention, and again in March when some 80 Cubans were injured or killed in a terrorist incident in Huambo, Angola.

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Thus, Castro, beset by major problems at home, in Central America, in Africa, and in the economic sphere, feels forced to consider discussions with the US seriously. [redacted]

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Reagan administration will spell even greater US hostility toward his regime. This almost certainly caused him to want to get talks under way well before the elections. The trip of the Reverend Jesse Jackson to Havana fortuitously provided Castro with the opportunity to press the negotiations issue in a manner that would guarantee broad media attention yet would not give the appearance of having succumbed to US military muscle.

Castro's Aims

In talks with Washington, Castro will not discuss distancing himself from Moscow or abandoning his "right" and "duty" to aid revolutionaries worldwide. We believe that these two issues are "sacred" to the Cuban leader.

On other matters, however, Castro is likely to demonstrate uncharacteristic flexibility. His apparent readiness to accept the Mariel "excludables", for example, shows a desire to reinstitute a continuing flow of emigrants from Cuba similar to the Varadero-Miami airlift of 1965-1972. He knows that continuing economic problems are going to produce further disenchantment within Cuba--he is expecting Radio Marti to feed popular disillusionment--and he believes the disgruntled are less likely to start trouble if they have a chance to emigrate. He knows a regular exodus will serve as a valuable source of information for Radio Marti but it will also help to reduce unemployment, ease the critical housing shortage, and tend to rid Cuba of those who consume but do not produce.

He may also be looking for a graceful way to reduce Cuba's military presence in Angola, although we believe serious movement on this issue is likely to have to await the outcome of the large Angolan government offensive against UNITA which is now under preparation. The offensive preparations have involved substantial Soviet and Cuban input and it appears the Cuban troops in Angola will play a substantially more active and aggressive role in the fighting. In our judgment, should the offensive inflict major damage on UNITA, the Angolans would be more likely to be able to move on the negotiation front, thereby opening the possibility of a Cuban troop withdrawal.

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In any event, Dos Santos' failure to consult with Castro on the South African negotiations early this year insulted the Cuban leader and most likely caused him to reconsider Cuba's role in, and sacrifices for, Angola. In light of events since then, he probably believes he has been deftly outflanked there and thus may be reluctant to continue his major investment in a client that has proved to be both ungrateful and untrustworthy. Moreover, Cuban casualties in Angola have become a serious domestic problem and if Angola can no longer pay for his troops and advisers, he has little motivation for keeping such a large contingent there. A rapid reduction might cause a slight increase in unemployment at home but, at least in the short term, returnees would be widely welcomed by the Cuban people. Castro would insist on avoiding the impression of a surrender and thus will likely link a troop reduction with some kind of acceptable arrangement on Namibia. Above anything else, he does not want to appear to be knuckling under to US pressure.

Castro may probe to see if he can gain a relaxation of some US economic restrictions, but this is not likely to be among the first items on his agenda for bilateral discussions. He might also be willing to negotiate an arrangement on Radio Marti, perhaps agreeing to eschew counterbroadcasts in return for a change in the radio's name. An agreement not to jam the US broadcasts, however, is almost certainly unattainable; the station is too great an ideological threat for Cuba's hardliners to accept without challenge.

To salvage the Salvadoran revolution, Castro may be prepared to curtail the logistical support Havana is providing the insurgents.

while we recognize that Castro may be making the offer only as bait to draw the US into talks, we believe it more likely that he feels compelled to offer a significant concession to prevent a total reversal of the revolutionary process as occurred in Grenada. Moreover, we believe Castro would continue to provide training for Salvadoran insurgents as well as continue to give them political guidance and propaganda support.

Any agreement to reduce the arms flow, however, would be temporary and would pertain only to the specific case of El Salvador. A blanket pledge to suspend aid to revolutionaries

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elsewhere is not in the cards. Moreover, Castro would have no hesitation about violating the agreement whenever it suited his purposes; if caught, he would manufacture an excuse to blame the US for breaking the agreement. In March 1975, for example, upon receiving Castro's pledge not to interfere in Colombia's internal affairs, Bogota resumed diplomatic relations with Havana. When Cuba was caught six years later training more than 100 Colombian guerrillas and returning them home, Castro claimed Colombia's decision to challenge Cuba for a seat in the United Nations Security Council released him from his pledge.

Frictions with Moscow

We see no indications that Castro, despite continuing friction with Moscow, has any intention of making fundamental changes in his relationship with the Soviets. No other country would provide such large volumes of military and economic support as Moscow does.

We see no compelling reason for Castro to distance himself from his strongest ally at the very time the pressure from his most powerful enemy is steadily increasing. In addition, his deep-seated hatred and fear of the US mean that the Cuban-US relationship is likely to be hostile so long as Castro remains in power.

The frictions that have surfaced between Havana and Moscow are common to most patron-client relationships and, in our estimation, are well within the limits of Cuban tolerance. Castro decided against attending the CEMA summit in Moscow in June because there was little but disappointment for Cuba in it, but he cannot complain about the level of Soviet assistance. He may chafe at Moscow's refusal to make a public pledge to defend Cuba in the event of a US military assault, but this is a matter of long standing and the Soviets have made amends by sending Havana a more than ample supply of arms. Castro may fulminate over the Soviet role--real or fancied--in the Grenada affair last October, but this seems to have had no impact on cooperation elsewhere since then. In short, we have seen no evidence that these bilateral problems have caused Castro to question the fundamental value of his ties to the USSR.

Conclusions

We have no evidence that Castro, in seeking talks with the US, is considering any fundamental reorientation of his regime.

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This, in our opinion, is out of the question. His determination to go down in history as the Simon Bolivar of the 20th century precludes any relaxation in his personal hostility toward the US. Moreover, he has a visceral distrust of the US that has been firmly substantiated--in his eyes--by the many actions the US has taken against him since 1959. His suspicions are strongly reinforced by all of his top advisers and the ex-guerrilla cohorts in his inner circle and none would urge him to consider a major political realignment.

At this point, Cuba needs far more than a propaganda victory or a few months time. Convinced that the administration will tighten the screws on Cuba even further during a second term, Castro is under time-pressure to see not only that discussions get under way but that they produce some quick results. Hence, he is likely to be influenced most effectively by concrete incentives. Assurances and clarifications regarding US goals in Angola, for example, might make Castro much more receptive to a troop withdrawal. He wants to be convinced that the US is not bent on destroying the MPLA government and replacing it with Jonas Savimbi's UNITA forces. He also wants assurances that a Cuban troop withdrawal can be portrayed in a positive light, with Cuba making a genuine contribution to Namibian independence rather than suffering an embarrassing foreign policy defeat.

Heretofore, Castro had had little faith in talks as a problem-solving tool. His ideological approach to international relations tends to define issues in stark, black-and-white terms, stifle compromise, and focus on all-or-nothing solutions. He cannot help but be impressed, however, over progress toward a resolution to the seemingly insoluble problems in southern Africa. He may have decided that opening channels to Washington might better enable him to protect Cuban interests in southern Africa, Central America, and elsewhere.

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